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ABSTRACT

A two-year federally funded project was designed to improve library service to the Bowen Children's Center, a State Department of Mental Health facility for the mentally retarded in Harrisburg, Illinois. The majority of the residents are 14 to 20 years of age. Visual and sound filmstrips, games, puzzles, visual and tactile materials, cassettes, and records which would interest and entertain while reinforcing skills were purchased. The book collection ranged in difficulty from touch-and-feel and manipulative books and easy books with simple pictures of everyday objects to high-interest/low-vocabulary books. Nonfiction books proved more popular than fiction. At first the library was kept open 8 hours a day, Tuesday through Saturday, and was available to residents whenever they received permission from their aides. Within 6 months an outreach program was developed where the librarian would visit children who were unable to come to the library. Volunteers were used extensively. The hope is that it has been demonstrated that a library is more than a collection of books and that the library and library staff have been accepted by the Bowen Children Center's staff and residents as a necessary and integral part of their institution. (Author/KKC)

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THE MENTALLY RETARDED ENJOY LIBRARIES TOO

by
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Until May of 1972 residents of the A. J. Bowen Children's Center, a State Department of Mental Health facility for the mentally retarded in Harrisburg, Illinois, had only token library service. The resident library collection, composed largely of donated books and a few recently purchased titles, was inadequate and dingy with age because of an altotal lack of funds available for library service. It was kept open one or two hours a day by a student worker under the supervision of the Dir. of Volunteer Services who had acquired the donations and other books on long-term loan from the Illinois State Library. Each resident was allowed about ten minutes (door-to-door time) per visit. Read-aloud picture book story hours with two or three residents at a time were conducted by volunteers.

In the spring of 1972 the Shawnee Library System was asked by the Department of Mental Health and the Illinois State Library to develop a two-year federally funded project designed to demonstrate the improved library service programs could be an effective and integral part of the total care and (re) habilitation of the Bowen residents. This we have tried to do. There have been times, however, when it seemed that only the residents and the upper administrative echelon really accepted us as having anything of value to offer. The staff, aware of our lack of experience in serving mildly, severely, and profoundly retarded people, wondered if we would fit in. They questioned, amongst themselves, how working with normal children in a busy children's room of a public library could have given us the right background experience.

The number of residents fluctuates frequently, the average being about 240. In the early fall of 1973 the population could be broken down in this manner:

DESCRIPTION	I.Q. RANGE	% of TOTAL POP.
Retarded		
Profound	under 20	21.21
Severe	21 to 35	19.25
Moderate ("Trainable")	36 to 51	31.92
Mild ("Educable")	52 to 67	20.66
Borderline ("Educable")	68 to 83	12.21
Emotionally disturbed	over 84	3.76

Of this group about one-third were girls and approximately 64% were in the 14 to 21-year old age group.

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In May 1972, we were prepared to accept as fact that few residents really read books for pleasure, that the majority of books previously circulated had probably been selected for one of two reasons: (1) stories to be read aloud by the residential aides or volunteers; (2) books chosen for cosmetic effect - the bigger and fatter, the better. We hoped to change the focus of the library collection by having materials available with which the residents could become involved individually, in which they might become suffieiently interested to allow us to help them. Visual and audio materials seemed to be of prime importance. We quickly purchased sound filmstrips, games, puzzles, visual and tactile materials, cassettes, and records that would interest and entertain them while reinforcing skills they were being taught throughout the facility. We hoped to break their habit of taking just any book by introducing them to other library materials, and to become acquainted with them as individuals. With Penny we have certainly failed - her only criteria of choice still remain whether a book looks impressive, contains few pictures, has small print, or has been checked out by her current boyfriend. Unfortunately, a bock to her is still only a status symbol, something important to be carried around. She likes to drop in quite frequently, but we have been unable to help her. With Peter we have succeeded to some extent. It took months of daily or weekly visits before he considered the library as anything more than a different room in which to wander around grabbing anything and everything. He usually insisted on taking out whatever book he happened to pick up at the last moment. One afternoon he was in a rare receptive mood and we finally captured his interest with a cassette/book Dr. Seuss beginning reader. Very gradually he has allowed us to help him make selections. He reads very few words but enjoys reading pictures, listening to records, and the cassette/book combinations.

At first the residents came out of curiosity, or because the library was a new place to go. Many returned frequently to work jigsaw puzzles, play games, enjoy films and filmstrips, or just talk. Some liked to draw and cut tiled walls soon became a brightly colored display area. Others became interested in helping us design and develop bulletin boards. Later they were to help make mobiles and Christmas tree decorations.

We became acquainted and respected one another - residents and librarians - while a casual observer may have wondered if we were running a teentown or a library. We enjoyed popular recordings together and often found pictures or articles about the artists in books or magazines which we read or talked about. Some of the older boys and girls were very interested in cars, motorcycles, moon landings, and baseball. Again we sometimes found pictures or books to tie in with our informal discussions. Only occasionally would they read the entire article or book, but sometimes it happened. We read pictures and picture book stories with individual children.

We played games, worked puzzles, and read stories to them for a multitude of reasons. Of prime importance was our need to become aware of their individual abilities, interests, and needs. Most of the children do not verbalize well so we wanted to develop a base from which to try to make a library valuable to them.

One popular game we played was Bingo, helping each other search the cards for the correct letter and number combinations. To be the "caller" was important, so we took turns. We found that the children's recognition of letters and numbers quickened to some degree, especially when they were allowed to spin the dial and make the calls.

Scrabble was surprisingly popular. We started playing it with an emotionally disturbed youth who had a fine oral vocabulary but never voluntarily touched reading materials, at least not in our presence. In his determination to beat us roundly, he gradually began using Webster's 7th New Collegiate Dictionary to check his spelling. Soon he began leafing through magazines and an occasional book while waiting for a game to begin. Other residents became interested. For many mental retardents Scrabble is very hard and they often need much help. Some seem determined to win and are becoming a little more adept at using new words learned in school as well as in an ever-present dictionary. Others can form words with the separate letters in their trays but need direction in using the letters on the board. One of the older girls who reads very poorly joined the game reluctantly one day when she had "nothing better to do." She apparently enjoyed herself and came back on other days to play again. Later she surprised us by bringing her rehabilitation teacher to the library for a game. She enjoys art, handicrafts, and talking much more than reading, but selects an occasional fiction book or one containing pictures she would like to copy.

Scrabble Junior was purchased but has not proved to be as popular. We also purchased the Scrabble Alphabet Game, expecting to play it with the moderately and mildly retarded residents. They enjoy it and so, too, do some of the emotionally disturbed youths.

We purchased a number of easy book/cassette sets as well as some of the same titles in filmstrip format. With this combination some of the residents have progressed from looking-and-listening to filmstrips to looking-listening-and-trying to read a book to finally accepting help to find other books to read. Roger, a gregarious teenager who reads very few words, started diffrently though. We introduced him to Clifford, the Big Red Dog the first time he came to the library. When he returned he was bursting with excitement and wanted to share the story with us. Going through the book page-by-page he told the story with so many descriptions and apt conversations it was hard to believe he was reading only the illustrations. After we introduced him to the cassette/book combinations of some other Clifford stories he sat daily in the library listening and trying to follow the printed works. At particularly funny parts he would guffaw, then take off the headset so we all could enjoy a laugh with him. Invariably he took out another copy of the same book to read over and over again but he has never seemed to enjoy the filmstrip version nor does he want the story to be read to him. He still reads pictures better than words but his enjoyment has expanded to include more than humor. Picture dictionaries fascinate him. Elsa has become a particular favorite and led him to other books about real animals. At present he is a Curious George fan, but willingly considers any other story we might suggest.

Most of our filmstrips are of traditional stories. They are enjoyed by many a child who will never be able to read the story. We also have some car and motorcycle racing, space exploration, and adventure for the older boys. Film and filmstrip programs have become a very popular daily occurrence. The librarian holds programs in residence areas, the study hall, and the library. She also borrows films for individual teachers and therapists to use. Many belong to Shawnee; many more are borrowed from the Sponsored Film Department of Swank Motion Pictures in St. Louis. We taught a group of older boys to operate the film and filmstrip projectors so they could show films for us in the classrooms and study hall. Unfortunately, jealousy raised its ugly head within the group so we discontinued the practice temporarily. We then were able to interest them in producing a puppet show for the study hall audience and added two girls to the group. At first they considered "Little Red Riding Hood" but found the traditional ending too gory. They wanted Red Riding Hood and her grandmother to hide in a closet for safety, and thought it would be a good idea to change the hunter into a policeman who could arrest the wolf and put him in jail. Finally they settled on a melodrama, complete with a villian to hiss and comely heroine and hero to applaud noisily. The result was not very professional but was certainly enjoyed by an excited, appreciative audience.

Our record collection contains stories, popular, and classical music as well as materials recorded especially for use with exceptional children. The residents usually prefer music with a strong beat. They enjoy Puff, the Magic Dragon, country music, "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing", songs from Disney films, guitar playing, and the Osmond Brothers. They particularly enjoy singing along with the recording artists. We have vigorously discouraged dancing to music in the library, but often they are taught ball-bouncing, jump-roping, and coordination by the physical education instructor to the beat of some of our records. Frequently they bring their own records to the library for us to enjoy with them. We do circulate records to residents who have players available in their living or recreational areas.

I have said little about the library's book collection because there is little unusual about it. We bought the best books possible for the children we serve. Included are both hardbound and paperback books ranging in difficulty from "touch-and-feel" and manipulative books, easy books with simple pictures of everyday objects to "high-interest low-vocabulary" books written below the sixth grade reading level. Incidentally, we have found nonfiction books to be of more interest to the majority of residents than fiction. During the summer of 1972 we ruthlessly weeded the original Bowen collection, discarding books that were in poor condition, outdated, or unsuitable for use. Concurrently with weeding, we inventoried the Illinois State Library books which were on long-term loan to Bowen. We also classified, cataloged, and shelflisted the entire collection. To brighten the shelves and expand the collection many Shawnee books, some records, a cassette player, and cassette/book combinations were issued to the resident library on indefinite loan. They were gradually returned to Shawnee as the newly ordered Bowen books arrived. Donations are still received; books and puzzles are sent to the librarian. We add to the collection those which will be of value, destroy the useless, and distribute the remainder to various parts of the institution to be used in whatever way they deem desirable.

We subscribed to 18 magazines, ranging from Jack and Jill to Newsweek. The latter is well read by the staff, not by the residents. They prefer Sports Illustrated, National Geographic, and Teen.

With the introduction of residence units for emotionally disturbed youth a limited number of books of interest to high school age boys and girls of normal reading ability were purchased. Our budget is not large so we could not order a wide range of materials. Fortunately any needed materials can be obtained quickly from the Shawnee Library System and the statewide network. We honor only those requests made by the residents themselves or for use with them; professional materials must be obtained through the Bowen Professional Library.

At first the library was kept open eight hours a day, Tuesday through Saturday, and was available to residents whenever they received oral permission from their aides. Our acceptance of "oral permission" led to unnecessary confusion because too many children came deliberately to the library when they were expected in other parts of the facility. Evidence of permission seemed necessary so simple library passes were developed and are still in use. Readily available to any child capable of coming to the library, they give the resident's name, residential area, time of departure from the residence, and length of time the resident may remain (usually 30 minutes). If an extension of time is desired we check with the aides via the telephone.

During the summer of 1972, 12 mentally retarded residents joined our system-wide (18 counties) summer reading club. Ten read the required ten books and earned certificates. Nonreading children were awarded different certificates for attendance at a series of picture-book hours, filmstrip showings, and game sessions.

By October 1972, we were ready to reach out - to bring the library outside its physical walls to the residents and staff who were not library users. Since our staff consists of only one and one-fifth persons (one full-time associate librarian and the system children's librarian who comes one day a week) we were forced to close the library part of each day. Some of our out-reach time was used to work with the children unable to come to the library at all and with those who were easily distracted unless included in very small, compatible groups of two or three. We also used it to conduct programs and promote deposit collections in the residence units, to establish contacts and plan programs with other departments, to have class visits, to search for overdue books - in fact, to use, advertise, promote, and retrieve our wares. Little by little more and more of the staff began thinking "library." The carpenter shop brings new boys for books about tools and wood (incidentally, he voluntarily constructed our puppet stage); residence aides request programs and collections of books to be placed in their wings; the Education Department asks for filmstrip and slide programs, class visits, and most recently, cooperation in their closed-circuit television program; Volunteer Services keeps us supplied with volunteers to train and direct as picture book storytellers (they also send other volunteers who will be assigned to work with the children in other areas such as cooking, personal hygiene, and activities so they will be aware of our resources); the Rehabilitation Dept. has assigned residents to work in the library as part of their vocational work training; the prekindergarten program makes extensive

use of our small picture collection, wooden puzzles, film and filmstrips; Outdoor Activities use handicraft and nature materials; Chaplain Hughey and his volunteers read many of our books with the children; the Health Educator, realizing our work load, has shared his student worker with us whenever he could. Not all of the staff members are library-oriented, nor can they realistically be expected to become so - but the number increases slowly.

What we have accomplished is but a beginning. Time moves much more swiftly than measurable accomplishments in a facility for the mentally retarded. There is still much to be accomplished. We have had very little success in touching the lives of the profoundly retarded, and have been unable to spend as much time working with them and with the severely retarded as we had hoped. One must work with them frequently on a one-to-one basis, and this we could not do. We have found neither the time nor staff to introduce the older residents to the public library as often as we would have liked - somehow it seemed more important to try to teach them first, within their own library, what a library is all about. We have experimented, stubbed our toes, and tried a different approach more times than I can tally, but feel we have demonstrated that a library is much more than a collection of books and that we have been accepted by a large majority of the staff and residents as necessary and integral part of their institution. We hope our efforts will bear more than temporary results, that funds to hire knowledgeable librarians and needed library materials will be made available so that resident libraries can become continuing, growing, integral parts of life for the mentally retarded throughout the state. Since residential institutional libraries will probably be small, we also hope that means will be found to augment their collections through cooperation with public and system libraries.

Illinois Libraries. March, 1974